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AN ESTIMATE OF THE VALUE AND
INFLUENCE OF WORKS OF FICTION
IN MODERN TIMES.

A PRIZE ESSAY,
READ IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JULY 2ND, 1862,

BY
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*AN ESTIMATE OF THE VALUE AND INFLUENCE
OF WORKS OF FICTION IN MODERN TIMES.*

WE commonly distinguish writings which appeal directly to the emotions from those of which the immediate object is the conveyance of knowledge, by applying to the former a term of conveniently loose meaning, "works of imagination." Of the kinds included in the wide denotation of this term there are three, between which it seems difficult at first sight to draw a definite line; which appeal to similar feelings, and excite a similar interest, in the different ages to which each is appropriate. These are the epic poem, the drama, and the novel. Each purports to be, in some sort, a reflex of human life and action, as obeying certain laws and tending to a certain end. In each men are represented, not as at rest, or in contemplative isolation, but in co-operation or collision. In each there is a combination of two elements, an outer element of incident, an inner of passion and character. In view of these common features, we might be tempted at first sight to suppose the difference between the three kinds to be merely one of form, merely the difference between the vehicle of prose and the vehicle of metre. We shall find, however, on deeper enquiry, that to the true artist, who does not find his materials in the world, but creates them according to the inner laws by which the world and himself are governed, the vehicle is not more a part of his creation than

the "impassioned truth" which it conveys. Here, as elsewhere, form and substance are inseparable; and the difference of form that distinguishes the novel from the other kinds of composition which it seems for the present to have superseded, symbolizes, or rather is identical with, a different potency in the art by which the substance is created.

Mere copying is not art. The farther the artist rises above the stage of imitation, the higher is his art, the more elevating its influence on those who can enter into its spirit. If the landscape-painter does nothing more than represent nature as seen by the outward eye, the vulgar objection against looking at pictures—"I can see as fine a view as this any day"—is unquestionably valid. But if the painter is anything better than a photographer, he does far more than this. He brings nature before us, as we have seen it, perhaps, only once or twice in our lives, under the influence of some strong emotion. He does that for us which we cannot do for ourselves; he reproduces those moments of spiritual exaltation in which "we feel that we are greater than we know"—moments which we can remember, and of which the mere memory may be the light of our lives, but which no act of our own will can bring back. It is not till the distinction has been appreciated between nature as it is and nature as we make it to be, between that which we see, and that which "having not seen we love," that any branch of art can be reckoned in its proper value.

In one sense of the words, it would no doubt be true to say that nature is simply and altogether that which we make it to be. Modern philosophy has discarded the language which represented our knowledge of things as the result of impressions and the transmission of images. If we still not only speak but think of ourselves as primarily passive and in contact with an alien world, this arises simply from the difficulty of conceiving a purely spontaneous activity. Driven from the crude imagination which found the primary condition of knowledge in the reception of "ideas" from without, "common sense" took refuge in the more refined hypothesis of unknown ob-

jects, which cause our sensations, and through sensations our knowledge. But this standing ground has been swept away by the consideration that such a cause may be found within as well as without, in the laws of the subject's activity, as well as in objects confessedly beyond the reach of cognition. Our ultimate analysis can find no element in knowledge which is not supplied by ourselves, in conformity to a ruling law, or which exists independently of the action of human thought.

But though the world of nature is, in this sense, a world of man's own creation, it is so in a different way from the world of art and of philosophy. Thought is indeed its parent, but thought in its primary stage fails to recognize it as its own, fails to transfer to it its own attributes of universality, and identity in difference. It sees outward objects merely in their diversity and isolation. It seeks to penetrate nature by endless dichotomy, glorying in that dissection of unity which is the abdication of its own prerogative. It treats outward things as ministering to animal wants, as the sources of personal and particular pleasures and pains; and thus induces the sense of bondage, of collision with a world in which it has not yet learnt to find itself. It places the end of human life not in harmony with the law which is the highest form of itself, but in happiness, *i. e.* in the extraction of the greatest possible amount of enjoyment from a world to which it seems to be accidentally related. The view of things corresponding to this stage of thought is what we commonly call their outward aspect. It is the aspect of matter-of-fact, of logic, of "mere morality," as opposed to that of art, of philosophy and religion.

The perfection of this latter and higher view involves the absolute fusion of thought and things. Its full attainment is a new creation of the world. Yet it is but the discovery of a relationship which was from the beginning, the adoption by thought of a child which was never other than its own. The habitual interpretation of natural events by the analogy of human design, to which every hour's conversation testifies, is the evidence that to the ordinary man nature presents itself

not as something external, but, like a friend, as "another himself." The true conquest of nature is but the completion of the reconciliation thus anticipated in the every-day language and consciousness of mankind. When the mind has come to see in the endless flux of outward things, not a succession of isolated phenomena, but the reflex of its own development into an infinite variety of laws on a basis of identity—when the laws of nature are raised to the character of laws which regulate admiration and love—when the experiences of life are held together in a medium of pure emotion, and the animal element so fused with the spiritual as to form one organization through which the same impulse runs with unimpeded energy—then man has made nature his own, by becoming a conscious partaker of the reason which animates him and it. The attainment of this consummation is the end of life: but it is an end that can never be fully realized, while "dualism" remains a necessary condition of humanity. To most men it is as a land very far off, of which occasional glimpses are caught from some "specular mount" of philosophic or poetic thought. It can only approach realization through the operation of a power which can penetrate the whole man, and act on every moment of his life. But that power, which in the form of religion can make every meal a sacrament, and transform human passion into the likeness of Divine love, is represented at a lower stage, not only by the unifying action of speculative philosophy, but by the combining force of art.

The artist, even at his lowest level, is more than an imitator of imitations. Abridgment, selection, combination, are the necessary instruments of his craft; and by their aid he introduces harmony and order into the confused multiplicity of sensuous images. He substitutes for the primary outward aspect of things a new view, in which thought already finds a restingplace. Just as strong emotion tends to make all known existence the setting of a single form; just as intense meditation sees in all experience the manifestation of a single idea; so the artist, even if he be merely telling a story, or

painting a common landscape, puts some of his materials in a relief, and combines all in a harmony, which the untaught eye does not find in the world as it is. He presents to us the facts in the one case, the outward objects in the other, as already acted upon by thought and emotion. In this sense every artist, instead of copying nature, idealizes it. In degree and mode, however, the idealization varies infinitely in the various kinds of art. It is by considering the height to which it is carried in the epic poem and the drama that we shall best appreciate its limitations in the novel.

In outward form the epic poem is simply a narrative in verse. Historically it seems to have originated in the records of ancestral heroism, which passed from mouth to mouth in metre, as the natural form of oral communication in an unlettered age. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* we first find this outward form penetrated by a new spirit, which converts the narrative into the poem. There is no need to do violence to historical probability by supposing that Homer was a conscious artist, or that he imagined himself to be doing anything else than representing events as they happened. We have simply to notice that in him facts have become poetry, and to ask ourselves what constitutes the change. How is it that the epic poet, while "holding up the mirror to nature," yet shows us in the glass a glory which belongs not to nature as we see it, in its material limitations? The answer is, that though he follows the essential laws of the human spirit, his scene is not the earth we live in. He fills it with actors other than the men who "hoard and sleep and feed" around us. He places the action either in heroic ages—in the "past which was never present," when gods were more human and men more divine—or in heavenly places, and among the powers of the air. The action is simple in proportion to its remoteness from the reality of life, and rapid in proportion to its simplicity. It arises from the operation of the most elementary passions, the wrath of Achilles or the pride of Satan, in collision with an overruling power. For the animal wants and tricks of fortune, which entangle the web of man's

affairs, it has no place. The animal element, if not banished from view altogether, becomes merely the organ of the ruling motions of the spirit; and fortune is lost in destiny or Providence. Thus the incidents of the narrative cease to be mere incidents. They are held together by passion; they are themselves, so to speak, manifestations of passion working with more and more intensity to the final consummation. Not the laws which regulate curiosity, but those which regulate hope and awe, are the laws which they have to satisfy.

In tragedy, as the product of a more cultivated age, these characteristics appear more strongly than in the primitive epic. The Homeric poems are still legendary narratives, though narratives unconsciously transmuted by the highest art. Tragedy, on the contrary, has no extraneous elements. It implies a conscious effort of the spirit, made for its own sake, to re-create human life according to spiritual laws; to transport itself from a world, where chance and appetite seem hourly to give the lie to its self-assertion, into one where it may work unimpeded by anything but the antagonism inherent in itself, and the presence of an overruling law. This result is attained simply by the action of the proper instruments of thought, abstraction and synthesis. The tragedian presents to us scenes of life, not its continuous flow of incident. In *Macbeth*, for instance, there is an hiatus of some years between the earlier and later acts; but we are not sensible of the void: for the passions which lead to the catastrophe are but the development of those which appear at the beginning, and to the law against which they struggle "a thousand years are but as yesterday." Time, however, is but one among many circumstances which the tragedian ignores. The common facts of life as it is, and always must have been, the influence of custom, the transition of passion into mechanical habit, the impossibility of continuous effort, the necessary arrangements of society, the wants of our animal nature and all that results from them—these are excluded from view, and so much only of the material of humanity is retained as can take its form from the action of the spirit, and

become a vehicle of pure passion. But the synthesis keeps pace with the abstraction, for the tragedian creates not passions but men. The outer garment, the flesh itself, is stripped off from man, that the spirit may be left to re-clothe itself according to its proper impulses and its proper laws. The false distinctions of dress, of manner, of physiognomy, are obliterated, that the true individuality which results from the internal modifications of passion may be seen in clearer outline. These modifications are as infinite and as complex as the spirit of man itself; and if the characters of the ancient dramatists, in their broad simplicity, fail to exhibit the finer lineaments of real life, yet in Shakspeare the variations of pure passion are as numerous and as subtle as those of the fleshly or customary mask by which man thinks that he knows his neighbour. The essential difference lies in the fact that they are variations of the spiritual, not the animal, man; that they arise from the qualifications of the spirit by itself, not from its intermixture with matter. It is this which gives tragedy its power over life. The problem of the diabolic nature, of the possibility of a "fallen spirit," is not for man to solve. He may be satisfied with the diagnosis of his own disease, with the knowledge that it is his littleness, not his greatness, that separates him from the divine; that not intellectual pride, not spiritual self-assertion, but the meanness of his ordinary desires, the degradation of his higher nature to the pursuit of animal ends, keep him under the curse. From this curse tragedy, in its measure, helps to relieve him. It "purifies his passions" by extricating them from their earthly immersion. For an hour, it may be, or a day, it raises him into a world of absolute ideality, where he may forget his wants and his vanity, and lose himself in a struggle in which the combatants are the forces of the spirit, and of which the end is that annihilation in collision with destiny which is but the blank side of reconciliation with it. And though his sojourn in this region be short, yet, when he falls again, the smell of the divine fire has passed upon him, and he bears about him, for a time at least, among the rank

vapours of the earth, something of the freshness and fragrance of the higher air.

In this sense, then, tragedy satisfies its definition as "the flight or elevation of life." The two indispensable supports which render this elevation possible, are metrical expression and great situations. "In the regeneration" the language of the market-place and the morning call may answer to the realized harmony of life; there may, indeed, be "the fifth act of a tragedy in every death-bed:" there may be no distinction of great or little, high or low. But it is an affectation to confound what shall be with what is. We cannot dissociate ordinary incidents from the petty wants out of which they ordinarily spring, nor common language from the common-place thoughts which it usually expresses. The action in tragedy must be relative to the situation; and if the situation be one which we are unable to separate from matter-of-fact associations, neither can the action be so separated except by an effort which of itself depresses the soaring spirit. Nor, again, if the action be high-wrought, above the measure of man's ordinary activity, can it find expression in the unrhythmical language which corresponds to that ordinary activity. New wine must not be put in old bottles; nor must the motions of disenthralled passion be confined in vessels worn by the uses of daily life.

These considerations may explain to us why the production of a great tragedy is almost an impossibility in our own time. The age most favourable to it would seem to be one in which men stand on the edge of an old and but half-known world—as Æschylus and Sophocles stood on the edge of the mythology, Shakspeare on that of the feudal world—an age of sufficient culture and reflection for men to be conscious of the glory they have left behind, while yet civilization has not reached the stage of acquiescence in things as they are, and scepticism as to all beyond them. Those great situations furnished by the mysterious past, in which passion quits the earth, soon lose their charm, and with the reign of Wonder that of Tragedy ceases. At Athens it gave place to the new Comedy,

whose highest boast was to copy present life (ὡς Μίμνησκε καὶ βίε πότερος ἢ ὑμῶν πότερον ἀπεμύησται): in modern Europe it has yielded to the novel.

The novel in its proper shape did not come to the birth in England till the time of Fielding and Richardson, but it had long been in process of formation. The seventeenth century at its close had lost the tragic impulse of its youth. The ecstatic hope of a new world, combined with the sad and wondering recollection of the old, which had raised the human spirit to the height of the Shaksperian tragedy, had died out, and the age had become eminently satisfied with itself. Wits, philosophers, and poets, alike were full of the present time. While the wits complimented each other on their superiority to the weaknesses of mankind, they made no scruple of indulging those weaknesses in their own persons. It was part of their business to do so, for it was part of "life." The only difference between them and other men was that they were weak and laughed over it, while others were weak and serious. Philosophers congratulated themselves on their new enlightenment; but it was an enlightenment which gave them insight into things as they are, not as they are to be. "The proper study of mankind," they held, was "man;" man, however, not in his boundless promise, but in the mean performance with which they proclaimed themselves satisfied. The poetry of the time was, at best, merely common-sense with ornamentation. It was neither lyrical nor tragic, though it may have tried to be both. It represented man neither as withdrawn into himself, nor as transported into an ideal world of action, but as observing and reasoning on his present affairs. The satire and moral essay were its characteristic forms.

The most pleasing expression of this self-satisfaction of the age is found in the *Spectator*, the first and best representative of that special style of literature—the only really popular literature of our time—which consists in talking to the public about itself. Humanity is taken as reflected in the ordinary life of men; and, as thus reflected, it is copied with the most minute fidelity. No attempt is made either to suppress the

baser elements of man's nature, or to transfigure them by a stronger light than that of the common understanding. No deeper laws are recognised than those which vindicate themselves to the eye of daily observation; no motives purer than the "mixed" ones which the practical philosopher delights to analyse, no life higher than that which is qualified by animal wants. The reader never finds himself carried into a region where it requires an effort to travel, or which is above the existing level of opinion and morality. It is from this levelness with life that the *Spectator* derives its interest—an interest so nearly the same, barring the absence of plot, with that of the novel, as to lead Macaulay to pronounce Addison "the forerunner of the great English novelists." The elements of the novel, indeed, already existed in Addison's time, and only required combination. Fictitious biography, which may be regarded as its raw material, had been written by Defoe with a life-like reality which has never since been equalled; and the popular drama furnished plots, in the shape of love stories drawn from present life. Let the adventures of the fictitious biography, instead of being merely external to the man, as in Defoe, be made subservient to that display of character in which Addison had shown himself a master, and let them become steps in the development of a love-plot, and the novel—the novel of the last century, at any rate—is fully formed. As was the self-contented, and therefore uncreative and prosaic, thought of the age, which produced the novel, such the novel itself continued to be. Man, comfortable and acquiescent, wished to amuse himself by a reflex of the life which he no longer aspired to transcend. He wanted to enjoy himself twice over—in act and in fancy; or, if the former were denied him, at least to explore in fancy the world of pleasure and excitement, of which circumstances abridged or disturbed his enjoyment in fact. In "the smooth tale, generally of love," the novelist supplied the want.

This Johnsonian definition may be objected to as merely accidental, and as inconsistent with the romantic character which the novel assumed in the hands of Sir Walter Scott.

It expresses, however, adequately enough the view which the popular novelists prior to Scott took of their own productions. Cervantes, though in his own great work attaining that rhapsody of grotesqueness which lies on the edge of poetry, had yet established the idea of the novel as the antithesis of romance. These novelists, accordingly, if they are not always telling the reader (like Fielding), seem yet to be always thinking to themselves, how perfectly natural their stories are. It is on this naturalness they pride themselves; and naturalness, in their sense, meant conformity to nature as it is commonly seen. This is the characteristic feature of the class. Whether, like Richardson, they analyse character from within, or, like Miss Austen, develop it in the outward particularities of an unruffled life—whether they describe, like Fielding, the buoyancy of a generous animalism, or, like Miss Edgeworth and Miss Burney, the precise decencies of conventional morality—they deal simply with eighteenth century life as seen by eighteenth century eyesight. All romantic virtue, all idealized passion, they rigorously eschew. Prudence they make the guide, happiness the end, of life. And they do well. They undertake to copy present life, and they do so. They have to reflect man's habitual consciousness: it is not for them to anticipate a consciousness which has not yet been attained, or to represent man's lower nature as absorbed in a spiritual movement which, because we cannot arrest it, we habitually ignore. It is just their deficiency in this respect which gives them their peculiar fascination. Man is not really mere man, though he may think himself so. He is always something potentially, which he is not actually; always inadequate to himself; and as such, disturbed and miserable. The novel, on the contrary, represents him as being what he vainly tries to be—adequate to himself. It offers to his imagination the full enjoyment of earthly life, unchallenged by obstinate surmises, untroubled by yearnings after the Divine. Ordinary men are satisfied with this enjoyment; the highest are allured by its temptation. The "reading public" is charmed with the contemplation of its own likeness, "twice

as natural" as life. Its own wisdom, its own wishes, its own vanity, are set before it in little with a completeness and finish which the deeper laws of the universe, vindicating themselves by apparent disorder and misfortune, happily prevent from being attained in real life. It is thus pleasantly flattered into contentment with itself—a contentment not disturbed by the occasional censure of practices which good taste condemns as ungraceful, or prudence as prejudicial to happiness. But the man of keener insight, who, instead of wrestling with the riddle of life, seeks for a time to forget it, and to place in its stead the rounded representation of activity which the novelist supplies, cannot but find the vanity of hiding his face from the presence which he dreads. Out of heart with the world about him—conscious of its actual meanness, and without vigour to re-cast it in the mould of his own thought—he fancies that after a sojourn in the world of fiction he may come back braced for his struggle with life. In his study, with a novel, he hopes to overlook the walls of his prison-house, to see the beginning and the end of human strife. But he soon finds himself in the embrace of the very power which he sought to escape. Here is the world itself brought back to him. Here is a perfect copy of that which in actual experience he sees but partially. The mirror is but too truly held up to nature. The getting and spending, the marrying and giving in marriage, the dominion of fortune which makes life a riddle, the prudential motives and worship of happiness which hide its divinity, these meet him here as they meet him in life, untransmuted, unidealized. Yet the charm of art overcomes him. The perfectness of the representation, the skill with which the incidents are combined to result in a crowning happiness behind which no sorrow seems to lie, make him find a pleasure in the copy which he cannot find in actual life, when in personal and painful collision with it. But meanwhile he gains no real strength, he reaches no new height of contemplation. He comes back to the world, as a man with a diseased digestion, after living for a time on spiced meats, comes back to ordinary food. He has not braced the assim-

lative power of his thought by a flight into the ideal world, or learnt even for a time to turn "matter to spirit by sublimation strange." He has remained on the earth, and though his fancy has for the hour given the earth a charm, he is no better able than he was before to raise his eyes from its dead level, or remove the limits of its horizon.

Thus, then, the old quarrel of the philosopher with the imitative arts seems to be revived in respect of the novel. But though novel-writers might be banished from a new republic, it would not be as artists, but for the inferiority of their art. An artist indeed the novelist is; he combines events and persons with reference to ends; he concentrates into a dialogue of a few sentences an amount of feeling and character which it would take real men some hours to express; he imparts a rapidity to the stream of incident quite unlike the sluggishness of our daily experience. In this sense he does not copy what we see, but shows us what we cannot see for ourselves. Our complaint against him is that the aspect of things which he shows us is merely the outward and natural, as opposed to the inner or ideal. His answer would probably be either that the ideal, in any sense in which it can be opposed to the natural, must be false and delusive; or that it is merely an accident of novel-writing, as hitherto practised, and not anything essential to this species of composition, which has prevented it from exhibiting the highest aspect of things; or, finally, that admitting the view which the novel presents to be necessarily lower than the poetic, it yet is a more useful view for man to contemplate.

Much fruitless controversy between naturalism and idealism in art might have been saved by a consideration of the true character of the antithesis. It becomes unmeaning as soon as nature is expanded to the fulness of the idea. And so expanded it may be, for, according to the old formula, it is always in flux. It is never in being, always in becoming. As has been already pointed out, it is what we see; and we see according to higher and lower laws of vision. We may look at man and the world either from without or from within.

We may observe man's actions like other phenomena, and from observation learn to ascribe them to certain general but distinct motives and faculties, which we do not refer to any higher unity; or, on the other hand, by the light of our own consciousness we may recognize that in man of which no observation of his actions could tell us—something which is in him, but yet is not his own; which combines with all his faculties, but is none of them: which gives them a unity, to which their diversity is merely relative. So again with regard to the phenomena of the world; we may look on these either simply as phenomena, or as manifestations of destiny or Divine will. The former view of man and the world we may conveniently call *natural*, because the only view that mere observation can give us; the latter *ideal*, because making observation posterior to something given in thought.

The tragedian, then, idealizes, because he starts from within. He reaches, as it were, the central fire, in the heat of which every separate faculty, every animal want, every fortuitous incident, is melted down and lost. We never could observe in actual experience passion such as Lear's, or meditation such as Hamlet's, fusing everything else into itself. Facts at every step would interfere to prevent such a possibility. But let us place ourselves, by the poet's help, within the soul of Lear or Hamlet, and we shall be able to follow the process by which the spiritual power, taking the form of passion in the one, and of thought in the other, and working outwards, draws everything into its own unity, according to the same activity of which, however impeded by the "imperfections of matter," we are conscious in ourselves. The incidents of the tragedy are wholly subordinate, issuing either from this spiritual energy of the actors on the one hand, or, on the other, from destiny, to whose throne the poet penetrates. They thus present an aspect entirely different from that of events which we approach from without. The novel, on the contrary, starts from the outside. Its main texture is a web of incidents through which the motions of the spirit must be discerned, if discerned at all. These

incidents must be probable, must be such as are consistent with the observed sequences of the world. The view of man, therefore, which we attain through them, can only be that which is attainable by observation of outward actions and events; or, in other words, according to the distinction which we have attempted to establish, it is the natural view, not the ideal. Its character corresponds to its origin. Observation shows us man not as self-determined, but as the creature of circumstances, as a phenomenon among other phenomena. As such, too, he is presented to us in the novel. We do not see him, as in Tragedy, standing in the strength of his own spirit, re-making the world by its power, determined by it for good or evil, dependent on it for all that may be attractive or repellent about him. The hero of a novel attracts in part by his physiognomy, his manner, or even his dress; his character is qualified by circumstances and society; his impulses vary according to the impressions of outward things; he is the sport of fortune, dependent for weal or woe on the acquisition of some external blessing which the development of the plot may or may not bestow on him. As circumstances make his life what it is, so the particular combination of circumstances, called happiness, constitutes its end. Instead of losing his merely personal and particular self, as in the catastrophe of a tragedy, he satisfies it with its appropriate pleasure. "He that loveth wife or children more than Me, is not worthy of Me," are the words of the Author of the Christian life. "Marry, enjoy domestic bliss, and thou hast attained the end of virtue"—such is the ordinary moral of the ordinary novel; nay, the only consistent moral of the consistent novel. As the novelist sows, so must he reap: as his plot is, such must its consummation be. In the body of the work he must, from the nature of the case, represent men as they appear in fact, and he cannot fitly round it off by representing them as they are only in idea. He cannot step at pleasure from one sphere of art to another; by attempting to do so he destroys the harmony, without which there is no art at all, and leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction and unreality. The reader, who

through the whole three volumes till close upon the end has been travelling in an atmosphere of ordinary morality and every-day aspiration, knows not how in the last chapter to breathe the air of a higher life.

It may be objected to this limitation of the capabilities of the novel, that it must stand on the same footing with the Epic Poem, which is no less made up of a texture of incident, and which, therefore, according to the present argument, can only reach the springs of man's actions from without. Such an objection has some truth with reference to the Homeric poems. These, as we have seen, have the legendary narrative for their primitive element, and in so far as they are merely a reflex of Greek life in the Homeric age, their interest is that of a novel, not properly of the Epic. The true Epic (of which the *Paradise Lost* would seem to be a less mixed form than the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*), no less than Tragedy, seizes the idea of a self-determined spirit on the one hand, and of Destiny or Divine law on the other. These are the primary springs from which it makes action and incident issue, with a perfect subordination which the laws of our lower nature and of social life must prevent from being realized in the world of experience, and which the novelist therefore, tied down to the world of experience, only offends us by attempting to exhibit. The essential character of the novel is not changed by its assumption of the form of a romance. In the romantic world of the middle ages, the great Italian poets did indeed find their materials. To their eyes it was a world in which hope and wonder might roam at large: it furnished actions which, glorified by them, became manifestations of the divine and heroic in man. But it is another world as seen by the novelist, even by such a one as Walter Scott. The romantic life, which he depicts, is simply the life which we see our own neighbours live, with more picturesque situations, with more to excite curiosity in the reader, and activity in the imaginary hero. We gain more from him, it is true, than from those copies of the too familiar faces around us which are the staple commodity in novels of the day. He at least carries us into scenes

of adventure, where we may forget the "smooth tale" of our nineteenth-century life. But further he cannot go, for he approaches men from without. He does not reach, by other methods than observation, to any *a priori* affection of the spirit, and to this subordinate incident. Had he done so, he could not have uttered himself in the language of common life. In the world of heroes or angels, *i. e.* of men idealized, to which the Epic poet raises us, he sustains us by the power of verse. The exalted action and the poetic expression are as essentially correlative in the Epic, as are the natural incident and the prosaic expression in the novel.

The hostility of Wordsworth to the "poetic diction" of his time rested on principles of which he scarcely seems himself to have been conscious. The poets of the last century had lost the genuine sense of their high calling. Their productions for the most part were, at best, practical philosophy in verse. They observed the outer aspect of things, and to make their observations poetry they clothed them in "poetic diction," which thus became offensive, because artificial—because a superadded ornament, and not the natural expression of exalted passion or the emotion which accompanies our passage "behind the veil." Repugnance to this artificiality misled Wordsworth into the celebrated assertion that "between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference:" an assertion which, as promoted by a feeling of the incompatibility of poetic language with prosaic thought, is really a witness to the essential antithesis between poetry and prose. Verse is simple, harmonious, and unfamiliar. It is thus the fitting organ for that energy of thought which simplifies the phenomena of life by referring them to a spiritual principle; which blends its shifting colours in the light of a master-passion, and passes from the contradictory data of the common understanding to the unity of a deeper consciousness. Even the spiritualist philosopher, no less than the poet, would have to speak in verse, if, instead of making statements, he portrayed: if besides asserting that "All things are to be seen in God," he sought to excite in the

reader the emotion appropriate to the sight. Prose is the "oratio soluta." It is complex, irregular, inharmonious. It thus corresponds to the natural or phenomenal view of life; the view of it, that is, in its diversity, as qualified in innumerable modes by animal wants and apparent accident, and not harmonized by the action of the spirit. The novelist must express himself in prose, because this is his view of life: and this must be his view of life, because he thus expresses himself. It is indeed a view which may vary according to the circumstances of the case, but only within definite limits. There is an "earnestness" about some of our modern novelists, Miss Brontë for instance, which would have seemed out of place to those of fifty years ago; but this is merely because the life they see around them is more "earnest." It presents to them scenes of sterner significance than were to be found among the coquetry and dissipation of the fashionable world, or the dull courtesies of a country house. But that they do not transcend this outward life we have one crucial proof. Just in so far as each of us learns to regard his own individual being from within, and not from without, does he discard dependence on happiness as arising from external circumstances, and becomes already in idea, as he tends to become in reality, his own world and his own law. No novelist attains to the assertion of this spiritual prerogative. As we follow in sympathy the story of his hero, we find ourselves lifted up and cast down as fortune changes, our life brightening as the clouds break above, and darkening as they close again. If the author chooses to disappoint us with "a bad ending," he leaves us, not as we are left at the conclusion of a tragedy, purified from personal desires, but vexed and sorrowful, sadder but not wiser men.

By the mere explanation of the difference between the ideal and the natural, the poetic and novelistic, views of the world, we may seem to have already settled the question as to the beneficial effects of each. The question, be it observed, is not as to the comparative influence of the discipline of art and that of real life. The man who seeks his entire culture in art of

any kind will soon find the old antagonism between speculation and action begin to appear. There will be a chasm, which he cannot fill, between his life in the closet and his life in the world : his impotence to carry his thought into act will limit and weaken the thought itself. But this ill result will equally ensue, whether the art in which he finds his nurture be that of the novelist or that of the poet. The novel-reader sees human action pass before him like a panorama, but he feels none of its pains and penalties ; his fancy feeds on its pleasures, but he has not to face the struggle of resistance to pleasure, or the suffering which follows on indulgence. Nor is it merely from that weakness of effect which, in one sense, must always belong to representation as opposed to reality, that the novel suffers. The representation itself is incomplete. The novelist, like every other artist, must abridge and select. For many of the elements whose action builds up our human soul, there is no place in his canvass. A great part of the discipline of life arises simply from its slowness. The long years of patient waiting and silent labour, the struggle with listlessness and pain, the loss of time by illness, the hope deferred, the doubt that lays hold on delay—these are the tests of that pertinacity in man which is but a step below heroism. The exhibition of them in the novel, however, is prevented by that rapidity of movement which is essential to its fascination ; and hence to one whose acquaintance with life was derived simply from novels, its main business would be unknown. They are perhaps more brought home to us by Defoe than by any other writer of fiction ; but this is due to that very deficiency of artistic power which makes his agglomeration of details such heavy reading to all but school-boys.

The novel, then, as being a work of art, must fail to teach the lesson of life in its completeness : as an inferior work of art, it has peculiar weaknesses of its own. However extensive the influence of the literature of fiction may have been, its intensity has been in inverse proportion. A great poem, once made our own, abides with us for ever.

“ Amid the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,”

the spirit, returning to it, may gain a fresh assurance of its *own* birthright, and purify itself, as in a river of Lethe, for an ideal transition to its proper home. The novel, itself the reflex of “the fretful stir unprofitable,” can exercise no such power. It can but make us more at home in the region from which a great poem transports us. The value of that experience of the world, which it is its object to impart, is commonly over-rated in our day. In the form in which it is imparted by the novelist, we have perhaps had too much of it without his aid. Our external environment is quite enough in our thoughts: we are not too reluctant to admit that we are what we seem to be, dependent for good or evil on circumstances which we do not make for ourselves. This dependence is in itself, no doubt, a fact; but it ceases to be so for us when we contemplate it in forgetfulness of that spring of potential freedom which underlies it, and of the law of duty correlative to freedom. To the exclusive consideration of it we owe those profitless recipes for eliciting moral health from circumstances which are the plague of modern literature, and which one of our ablest writers has lately condescended to dispense, in an essay on “organization in daily life.” This circumstantial view of life, if we may use the term, being the only one that the novelist can convey, prudence is his highest morality. But it may be doubted whether prudence is what any one has great need to learn. The plain man, who fronting circumstances boldly on the one hand, looks reverently to the stern face of Duty on the other, can dispense with its maxims. For the moral valetudinarian small benefit is to be gained from a doctor who will—

“ Read each wound, each weakness clear,
Will strike his finger on the place
And say, ‘Thou ailst here and here.’ ”

It is far better for him, instead of poring over a detail of the causes and symptoms of the disease which he hugs, to be

stimulated to an effort in which, though it be but temporary, ecstatic, and for an end not actually attainable, he may at least forget the disease altogether. Such a stimulus a great poem may afford him; but in the whole expanse of novel-literature he merely sees his own sickly experience modified in an infinite variety of reflections, till he fancies that the "strange disease of modern life" is the proper constitution of God's universe.

Novel-reading thus aggravates two of the worst maladies of modern times, self-consciousness and want of reverence. Many a man in these days, instead of doing some sound piece of work for mankind, spends his time in explaining to himself why it is that he does not do it, and how, after all, he is superior to those who do. Even men of a higher sort never seem to forget themselves in their work. Our popular writers generally take the reader into confidence as to their private feelings as they go along: our men of action are burdened by a sense of their reputation with "intelligent circles." No one loses himself in a cause. Scarcely understanding what is meant by a "divine indifference" as to the fate of individual existences in the evolution of God's plan, we weary Heaven with complaints that we find the world contrary, or that we cannot satisfy ourselves with a theory of life. Thus "measuring ourselves by ourselves, and comparing ourselves among ourselves, we are not wise." The novel furnishes the standard for the measurement, and the data for the comparison. It presents us with a series of fictitious experiences, in the light of which we read our own, and become more critically conscious of them. Instead of idealizing life, if we may so express ourselves, it sentimentalizes it. It does not subordinate incidents to ideas; yet it does not treat them simply as phenomena to excite curiosity, but as misfortunes or blessings to excite sentiment. The writer of the *Mill on the Floss* reaches almost the tragic pitch towards the close of his book, and if he had been content to leave us with the death of the heroine and her brother in the flood, we might have supposed that in this case, as representing the annihilation of human passion

in the struggle with Destiny, the novelist had indeed attained the ideal view of life. But the novelistic instinct does not allow him to do so. At the final conclusion we are shown the other chief actors standing, with appropriate emotions, over the heroine's grave, and thus find that the catastrophe has not really been the manifestation of an idea, but an occasion of sentiment. The habitual novel-reader, from thus looking sentimentally at the fictitious life which is the reflex of his own, soon comes to look sentimentally at himself. He thinks his personal joys and sorrows of interest to angels and men; and instead of gazing with awe and exultation upon the world, as a theatre for the display of God's glory and the unknown might of man, he sees in it merely an organism for affecting himself with pains and pleasures. Thus regarded, it must needs lose its claim on his reverence, for it is narrowed to the limits of his own consciousness. Conversant with present life in all its outward aspects, he forgets the infinite spaces which lie around and above it. This confinement of view, which among the more intelligent appears merely as disbelief in the possibilities of man, takes a more offensive form in the complacent blindness of ordinary minds. We have no wish to disparage our own age in comparison with any that have preceded it. Young men have always been ignorant, and ignorance has always been conceited. There is, however, this difference. The ignorant young men of past time, such as the five sons of Sir Hildebrand Osbaldistone, knew that they were ignorant, but thought it no shame: the ignorant young men of our days, with the miscellaneous knowledge of life which they derive from the popular novelists, fancy themselves wiser than the aged. Whoever be the philosopher, the coxcomb now-a-days will answer him not merely with a grin, but with a joke which he has still in lavender from Dickens or his imitators. The comic aspect of life is indeed plain enough to see, nor is the merely pathetic much less obvious; but there is little good in looking at either. It is far easier to laugh or to weep than to think; to give either a ludicrous or sentimental turn to a great principle of morals or religion, than to

enter into its real meaning. But the vulgar reader of our comic novelists, when he has learnt from them a jest or a sentiment for every occasion of life, fancies that nothing more remains unseen and unsaid.

But there is another side to this question, which we must not allow ourselves to overlook. We have shown what the novel cannot do, and its ill effect on those who trust to it for their culture. We must not forget that it has a proper work of its own which, if modern progress be anything more than a euphemism, must be a work for good. Least of all should it be depreciated by the student, who may find in it deliverance from the necessary confinement of his actual life. For the production of poetic effect, as we have seen, large abstraction is necessary. It is with man in the purity of his inward being, with nature in its simple greatness, that the poet deals. The glory which he casts on life is far higher than any which the novelist knows; but it is only on certain of the elements of life that it can be cast at all. The novelist works on a far wider field. With choice of subject and situation he scarcely need trouble himself, except in regard to his own intellectual qualifications. Wherever human thought is free, and human character can display itself, whether in the servants' hall or the drawing-room, whether in the country mansion or the back alley, he may find his materials. He is thus a great expander of sympathies; and if he cannot help us to make the world our own by the power of ideas, he at least carries our thought into many a far country of human experience, which it could not otherwise have reached. We hear much in these days of the sacrifice of the individual to society through professional limitations. In the progressive division of labour, while we become more useful as citizens, we seem to lose our completeness as men. The requirements of special study become more exacting, at the same time that the perfect organization of modern society removes the excitement of adventure, and the occasion for independent effort. There is less of human interest to touch us within our calling, and we have less leisure to seek it beyond. Hence it follows that

one who has made the most of his profession is apt to feel that he has not attained his full stature as a man; that he has faculties which he can never use, capacities for admiration and affection which can never meet with an adequate object. To this feeling, probably, are mainly due our lamentations over a past age of hero-worship and romance, when action was more decisive and passion a fuller stream. Its alleviation, if not its remedy, is to be found in the newspaper and the novel. Every one indeed must lay in his own experience the foundation of the imaginary world which he rears for himself. There is a primary "virtue which cannot be taught." No man can learn from another the meaning of human activity or the possibilities of human emotion. But this "*πῶν στῶ*" being given, even the cloistered student may find that, as his soul passes into the strife of social forces and the complication of individual experience, which the newspaper and the novel severally represent, his sympathies break from the bondage of his personal situation and reach to the utmost confines of human life. The personal experience and the fictitious act and re-act on each other, the personal experience giving reality to the fictitious, the fictitious expansion to the personal. He need no longer envy the man of action and adventure, or sigh for new regions of enterprise. The world is all before him. He may explore its recesses without being disturbed by its passions; and if the end of experience be the knowledge of God's garment, as preliminary to that of God Himself, his eye may be as well trained for the "vision beatific," as if he had himself been an actor in the scenes to which imagination transfers him.

The novelist not only works on more various elements, he appeals to more ordinary minds than the poet. This indeed is the strongest practical proof of his essential inferiority as an artist. All who are capable of an interest in incidents of life which do not affect themselves, may feel the same interest more keenly in a novel; but to those only who can lift the curtain does a poem speak intelligibly. It is the two-fold characteristic, of universal intelligibility and indiscriminate

adoption of materials, that gives the novel its place as the great reformer and leveller of our time. Reforming and levelling are indeed more closely allied than we are commonly disposed to admit. Social abuses are nearly always the result of defective organization. The demarcations of family, of territory, or of class, prevent the proper fusion of parts into the whole. The work of the reformer progresses, as the social force is brought to bear more and more fully on ~~classes~~ and individuals, merging distinctions of privilege and position in the one social organism. The novel is one of the main agencies through which this force acts. It gathers up manifold experiences, corresponding to manifold situations of life; and subordinating each to the whole, gives to every particular situation a new character, as qualified by all the rest. Every good novel, therefore, does something to check what may be called the despotism of situations; to prevent that ossification into prejudices, arising from situation, to which all feel a tendency. The general novel-literature of any age may be regarded as an assertion by mankind at large, in its then development, of its claims, as against the influence of class and position; whether that influence appear in the form of positive social injustice, of oppressive custom, or simply of deficient sympathy.

To be what he is, the novelist must be a man with large powers of sympathetic observation. He must have an eye for the "humanities" which underlie the estranging barriers of social demarcation, and in relation to which the influence of those barriers can alone be rightly appreciated. We have already spoken of that acquiescence in the dominion of circumstance, to which we are all too ready to give way, and which exclusive novel-reading tends to foster. The circumstances, however, whose rule we recognize, are apt to be merely our own or those of our class. We are blind to other "idola" than those of our own cave; we do not understand that the feelings which betray us into "indiscretions" may, when differently modified by a different situation, lead others to game-stealing or trade-outrages. From this narrowness of view the novelist may do much to deliver us. The variations

of feeling and action with those of circumstance, and the essential human identity which these variations cannot touch, are his special province. He shows us that crime does not always imply sin, that a social heresy may be the assertion of a native right, that an offence which leads to conventional outlawry may be merely the rebellion of a generous nature against conventional tyranny. Thus, if he does not do everything, he does much. Though he cannot reveal to us the inner side of life, he at least gives a more adequate conception of its surface. Though he cannot raise us to a point of view from which circumstances appear subordinate to spiritual laws, he yet saves us from being blinded, if not from being influenced, by the circumstances of our own position. Though he cannot show the prisoners the way of escape from their earthly confinement, yet by breaking down the partitions between the cells he enables them to combine their strength for a better arrangement of the prison-house. The most wounding social wrongs more often arise from ignorance than from malice, from acquiescence in the opinion of a class rather than from deliberate selfishness. The master cannot enter into the feelings of the servant, nor the servant into those of his master. The master cannot understand how any good quality can lead one to "forget his station;" to the servant the spirit of management in the master seems mere "driving." This is only a sample of what is going on all society over. The relation between the higher and lower classes becomes irritating, and therefore injurious, not from any conscious unfairness on either side, but simply from the want of a common understanding; while at the same time every class suffers within its own limits from the prevalence of habits and ideas, under the authority of class-convention, which could not long maintain themselves if once placed in the light of general opinion. Against this two-fold oppression, the novel, from its first establishment as a substantive branch of literature, has made vigorous war. From Defoe to Kingsley its history boasts of a noble army of social reformers; yet the work which these writers have achieved has had little to do

with the morals—commonly valueless, if not false and sentimental—which they have severally believed themselves to convey. Defoe's notion of a moral seems to have been the vulgar one that vice must be palpably punished and virtue rewarded; he recommends his *Moll Flanders* to the reader on the ground that "there is not a wicked action in any part of it, but is first or last rendered unhappy or unfortunate." The moral of Fielding's novels, if moral it can be called, is simply the importance of that prudence which his heroes might have dispensed with, but for the wildness of their animal license. Yet both Defoe and Fielding had a real lesson to teach mankind. The thieves and harlots, whom Defoe prides himself on punishing, but whose adventures he describes with the minuteness of affection, are what we ourselves might have been; and in their histories we hear, if not the "music," yet the "harsh and grating" cry of suffering humanity. Fielding's merit is of the same kind; but the sympathies which he excites are more general, as his scenes are more varied, than those of Defoe. His coarseness is everywhere redeemed by a genuine feeling for the contumelious buffets to which weakness is exposed. He has the practical insight of Dickens and Thackeray, without their infusion of sentiment. He does not moralize over the contrast between the rich man's law and the poor man's, over the "indifference" of rural justice, over the lying and adultery of fashionable life. He simply makes us see the facts, which are everywhere under our eyes, but too close to us for discernment. He shows society where its sores lie, appealing from the judgment of the diseased class itself to that public intelligence which, in spite of the cynic's sneer on the task of "producing an Honesty from the combined action of Knaves," has really power to over-ride private selfishness. The same sermon has found many preachers since, the unconscious missionaries being perhaps the greatest. Scott was a Tory of the purest water. His mind was busy with the revival of a pseudo-feudalism: no thought of reforming abuses probably ever entered it. Yet his genial human insight made him a reformer against his will. He who makes

man better known to man takes the first steps towards healing the wounds which man inflicts on man. The permanent value of Scott's novels lies in his pictures of the Scotch peasantry. He popularized the work which the Lake Poets had begun, of re-opening the primary springs of human passion. "Love he had found in huts where poor men lie," and he announced the discovery; teaching the "world" of English gentry what for a century and a half they had seemed to forget, that the human soul in its strength, no less than in its weakness, is independent of the accessories of fortune. He left no equals, but the combined force of his successors has been constantly growing in practical effect. They have probably done more than the journalists to produce that improvement in the organization of modern life, which leads to the notion that, because social grievances are less obvious, they have ceased to exist. The novelist catches the cry of suffering before it has obtained the strength, or general recognition, which are presupposed when the newspaper becomes its mouth-piece. The miseries of the marriage-market had been told by Thackeray, with almost wearisome iteration, many years before they found utterance in the columns of the *Times*.

It may indeed be truly said that, after all, human selfishness is much the same as it ever was; that luxury still drowns sympathy; that riches and poverty have still their old estranging influence. The novel, as has been shown, cannot give a new birth to the spirit, or initiate the effort to transcend the separations of place and circumstance; but it is no small thing that it should remove the barriers of ignorance and antipathy, which would otherwise render the effort unavailing. It at least brings man nearer to his neighbour, and enables each class to see itself as others see it. And from the fusion of opinions and sympathies thus produced, a general sentiment is elicited, to which oppression of any kind, whether of one class by another, or of individuals by the tyranny of sectarian custom, seldom appeals in vain.

The novelist is a leveller also in another sense than that of

which we have already spoken. He helps to level intellects as well as situations. He supplies a kind of literary food, which the weakest natures can assimilate as well as the strongest, and by the consumption of which the former sort lose much of their weakness and the latter much of their strength. While minds of the lower order acquire from novel-reading a cultivation which they previously lacked, the higher seem proportionately to sink. They lose that aspiring pride which arises from the sense of walking in intellect on the necks of a subject crowd; they no longer feel the bracing influence of living solely among the highest forms of art; they become conformed insensibly to the general opinion which the new *littérature* of the people creates. A similar change is going on in every department of man's activity. The history of thought in its artistic form is parallel to its history in its other manifestations. The spirit descends, that it may rise again; it penetrates more and more widely into matter, that it may make the world more completely its own. Political life seems no longer attractive, now that political ideas and power are disseminated among the mass, and the reason is recognized as belonging not to a ruling caste merely, but to all. A statesman in a political society resting on a substratum of slavery, and admitting no limits to the province of government, was a very different person from the modern servant of "a nation of shopkeepers," whose best work is to save the pockets of the poor. It would seem as if man lost his nobleness when he ceased to govern, and as if the equal rule of all was equivalent to the rule of none. Yet we hold fast to the faith that the "cultivation of the masses," which has for the present superseded the development of the individual, will in its maturity produce some higher type even of individual manhood than any which the old world has known. We may rest on the same faith in tracing the history of literature. In the novel we must admit that the creative faculty has taken a lower form than it held in the Epic and the Tragedy. But, since in this form it acts on more extensive material and reaches more men, we may well believe that this temporary declension

is preparatory to some higher development, when the poet shall idealize life without making abstraction of any of its elements, and when the secret of existence, which he now speaks to the inward ear of a few, may be proclaimed on the house-tops to the common intelligence of mankind.



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An estimate of the value
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